From Text to Stage

Text and Performance

The complex and interdependent relationships between play-text, stage and performance have always been an integral part of theatre history and theatre criticism. From Aristotle's *Poetics* (c.335), through the anti-theatrical debates during the early modern period to the modernist and postmodernist concepts of performance as an autonomous aesthetic activity, theatre has always been understood and experienced as an *event*; an event that is defined both by historical contingencies (i.e. specific socio-historical contexts, precise staging conventions) and a sense of 'liveness', immediacy and ephemerality that seems impossible to re-create let alone systemise into a methodology or critical theory. For all these reasons the study of theatrical play-texts, has tended to focus on their literary dimension, as if they were already completed works of art that simply need to be staged in the imagination of the reader. However, this literary aspect of theatre is always *dynamic*, a blue-print for performance that at once acknowledges the staging conventions within which it was written *and* offers the possibility of creating a new, original event every time a play-text is performed. And this *dynamic* relationship between text, staging and performance is where, as contemporary theatre anthropologists and performance theorist claim, the uniqueness of theatre lies as a literary genre and aesthetic phenomenon. Furthermore, in order to be fully realized, theatre needs an audience. All this makes for an aesthetic experience that extends way beyond the act of reading and imagining a world proposed by a play-text. This power of the performance event to engage us physically, intellectually and emotionally, individually *and* collectively, has at times throughout its history accorded theatre a privileged position in society (as in the case of classical Athenian drama, or the uses of theatre in political propaganda). At other times, however, it has made it a target of censorship and persecution; all testament to the sometimes overwhelming sensation and impact that a theatrical event may have on its audience. This impact that theatre potentially has on its audience derives from the fact that it is not simply *written*, but also *made*, staged and performed.

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Historically every period of literary theatrical achievement (especially what we understand as the classics; Athenian drama of the fifth century BCE, Elizabethan

drama, French and German neo-classicism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries), has created its mechanics of production, a set of discourses that facilitate the transition from text to stage. Although the term *mise en scène* is relatively modern, coined during the nineteenth century, every performance requires stages of preparation, casting, setting the play to scenery and usually music, laborious rehearsals, that also demand systems of funding. In classical Athens this process of production was supported by the *polis* itself (funded by a wealthy Athenian) as performances of tragedies took place within the greatest civic festival of the time, the Great Dionysia. Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides were not simply dramatic poets but prototype directors as well as they were responsible not only for the writing of the script but for the training of the chorus (*chorodidaskaloi*) and the actors, training that involved singing, dancing as well as acting. In creating these performances these great tragedians also relied, but crucially modified and in turn helped to formulate a set of dramatic conventions. Archaeologists, classicists and theatre historians have helped to recover and define the function of some of these: the use of masks, the function of the chorus, the use of music, the stylised setting, the use of stylised gesture, the function of myth, the all-male *hypocrites* (the Greek term for actors) and the all-male audience (probably). The use of the adverb probably is indicative here, as while we are certain about some of these conventions others are still matters open to debate. The crucial issue, however, is that the classical Athenian tragedies were written with these conventions in mind and the three tragedians that helped to define tragic form at once worked within these conventions and helped to modify them, for the process was not simply mechanical but imaginative and creative. And, of course, these conventions were not simply formal devices but also reflected contemporary philosophical, aesthetic and socio-political attitudes and sensibilities about the role of women, the relationship to myth and the Gods, the function of representation and enactment, as theatre functioned in the words of Pericles as the great school of Athenian democracy. This early precursor of the *mise en scène*, like its modern and especially modernist reincarnation, refers to a set of formal devices that help to materialise the process from text to stage, a creative process that generates presence and projects a world-view, an image of itself back to the audience.

When approaching a play-text as a piece of literature is it vital, therefore, to be aware of these historical conventions. They help us to realise that the play we are reading is part of an intricate set of relationships and cannot really exist outside these.

In turn this 'toolkit' of production that almost every play-text comes with, reflects the systems of belief and ideology of the society it is helping to represent. The huge and varied cast of actors, *choragoi*, *chorodidaskaloi*, impresarios, movement and voice coaches, dramaturges, stage and actor managers (all precursors of the modernist director – more on that later), also gives us an indication of the history of the theatre professions – the appearance of the first English actresses, for example, in the period of Restoration drama - and the socio-political position that these professionals occupied in their society. However, while all these factors are crucial as matters of scholarly research and debate, how important are they when we approach historical play-texts for performance today? Can we ignore all these conventions according to which the plays were written and simply approach them for the ideas and issues they raise about human nature? On the other hand, are we in danger of producing a 'museum' performance if we adhere too strictly to the historical conventions of a piece? And are these ever fully recoverable? All these questions became particularly pertinent after 1910 and during the modernist period in English literature; a period characterised by the urge to 'make it new' in the words of Ezra Pound, which in the field of theatre heralded the complete 'emancipation' of the notion of performance from the 'tyranny' of the literary text.

It might be helpful at this stage, in order to tease out some of these concerns (and not necessarily to resolve them) to glimpse briefly into the performance history of one of Shakespeare's greatest tragedies, *King Lear*, written within the conventions of Elizabethan drama. Like Greek drama, Elizabethan drama was not realistic but highly conventional. These conventions included: the use of poetry, asides, soliloquies, boys playing the roles of women, conventions of time and space, little scenery and elaborate costumes. The performances themselves were framed by dancing before after the play. These dances were known as jigs and offered a vaudeville-style commentary on contemporary events. The most famous jig was performed by Will Kemp, the re-known clown in Shakespeare's company and lasted for 9 days, as long as it took him to travel from London to Norwich (published in 1600 as *Kemps nine daies wonder*). All these factors have informed the making of the play but also its reception by audiences throughout its staging history. Notoriously, *King Lear* is also burdened with a reputation of being unperformable due to its philosophical, somewhat apocalyptic and bombastic language and its bleak,

relentlessly pessimistic ending. Famously Charles Lamb, Leon Tolstoy and Henry James, all believed it was impossible to stage.

The first problem we encounter is that of the two versions of the play-text. It is more or less accepted today that the text of *King Lear* changed drastically over the years. These changes probably result from the work of editors and crucially theatre makers. Interestingly there are two versions of the text even from its own historical period. Although the first version, the Quarto of 1608, appears in Shakespeare's time, most scholars agree that the playwright was not involved with the editions of the Quarto. While the Folio of 1623, created after Shakespeare's death, is said to be the result of the collaboration between printers and two members of Shakespeare's company interested in preserving a version that was believed to be more appropriate for the purposes of performance. Indeed, it is the Folio version that is mostly used for performances today. Christie Carson[1] claims that the textual differences between the Quarto and the Folio versions of the play result from audience responses during Shakespeare's lifetime. However, it is not certain whether Shakespeare would have approved or even been aware of these. This is a very radical claim and one that endows the audience with extraordinary power (a precursor to the re-writing of Hollywood film endings, taking on board initial audience response?). Furthermore, as Christie claims, the Folio audience-informed version dramatically re-writes the ending of the play, giving an optimistic tone to what appears as a bleak ending in the Quarto. This is significant in a play that has been read as post-apocalyptic (probably written after the death of Queen Elizabeth in 1603), relentlessly nihilistic in its study of masculine power and lineage, and deeply troubling about the 'nature' of women.

The quest for a 'happy ending' seems to haunt the reception history of this play in production for as early as 1681 the Irish playwright Nahum Tate wrote a version striking many of Shakespeare's lines, getting rid of the Fool altogether and creating a love interest for Cordelia in the role of Edgar. In 1742 David Garrick reinstated some of Shakespeare's lines but kept Tate's uplifting ending. Edmund Kean tried to go back to Shakespeare's full text but this performance only lasted for three nights as again it was deemed 'unbearable' for the audience. It wasn't until the mid-nineteenth century that Shakespeare's text was performed more or less in full by Macready (1838). Yet again the question remains whether this 'full' text was the Quarto version or the Folio.

Modern productions of the play do not shy away from its bleak, apocalyptic atmosphere, but rather revel in it, as did Peter Brook's groundbreaking production of 1962. Despite the charges of unperformability and anti-theatricality *King Lear* has proved to be one of Shakespeare's most adapted and adaptable plays on the stage and on the screen (notably the Russian version of 1970 directed by Grigori Kozintsev with music by Dmitri Shostakovich and the Japanese version *Ran*, directed by Akira Kurosawa in 1985).

In a sense every contemporary or future performance of the play is in dialogue with its staging history and forms part of this on-going negotiation between play-text and reception. The historical conventions of production, the material conditions that helped to create Shakespeare's own performances are not simply a matter of empirical historical fact, but exist in the ways the plays themselves are written; they help give shape to the world of the play. And this world is primarily expressed/embodied through the function of the actor. This is all the more the case when it comes to Elizabethan acting, which was not psychological and character based, the modes we are familiar with today through Naturalism and film. Rather than express the inner world of the role or character the acting was partly stylised, exaggerated, external (some may say even melodramatic) as it had to express highly poetic language (and not every day language) and was partly responsible through language and dialogue of creating the world of play, as scenery was basic and schematised and not representational. Hence the emphasis on costumes, which were detailed and highly codified denoting the class, rank and even character of the role portrayed. How is then a contemporary actor approaching the role of Lear to engage with these conventions, taking on board that most actor-training today is psychologically based and does not only rely on external conventions?

It might be helpful at this point to introduce a set of terms used by contemporary performance theorists when attempting to describe the function of the actor, keeping in mind that this function is primarily based on the physicality of the performing body. There is a distinction between the actor's *phenomenal body*, her/his physical bodily being-in-the-world and the actor's *semiotic body*, what the performer is representing or attempting to embody. Throughout the history of acting it is only really in the tradition of Naturalism where the two converge, where the actor is asked to physically and significantly psychologically 'be' the role. In most acting traditions from the Greek theatre to Elizabethan this relationship between the *phenomenal body*

of the performer and the *semiotic body* is a conventional one, delineated by rules and forms that the actor acquires and importantly the audience is able to decode. In this sense the actor performing Lear is not asked to 'be' Lear, but to portray, exhibit, demonstrate him (and his world), through a mode of acting that celebrates its artificiality, its theatricality and does not try to hide it. Significantly it also clearly portrays the interpretation of Lear that the particular actor brings to the role in the process of demonstrating it to the audience. This mode of acting also allows the actor to perform asides, to directly address the audience and step in and out of the world of the play, something that was common in the Elizabethan playhouse, the architecture of which, an apron stage, facilitated this. The reconstruction of The Globe[2] in London has provided performers, directors and scholars with very useful insights into how Shakespeare's theatre worked in performance; in turn these insights have informed contemporary stagings of the plays.

In the 1997 production of *King Lear* directed by Richard Eye with Ian Holm in the leading role there was one of those electrifying, epiphanic theatrical moments where an actor creates 'presence'. In the words of Patrice Pavis:

> 'To have presence' in theatrical parlance, is to know how to capture the attention of the public and make an impression; it is also to be endowed with a *je ne sais quoi* which triggers an immediate feeling of identification in the spectator, communicating a sense of living elsewhere and in an eternal present.[3]

This was the scene in the heath towards the end of the play where actor and director decided to literally enact Shakespeare's words 'Off, off you lendings' and present a naked Ian Holm, stumbling about extremely vulnerable, like a 'bare forked animal' on the bleak stage. The nakedness of Lear/ Holm appears shocking but at the same time can be read as a sophisticated way of at once nodding towards historical performance conventions and creating an ultimately modern reading of the play, bringing out its existential bleakness (although Eyre used the Folio). The total absence of costume and the seeming conflation of the phenomenal and semiotic body, could be said to pay homage to the Elizabethan emphasis on costume; here, however, the costume has become the naked body of the actor, where now lacking meaning and reason becomes itself a mask that enacts the word 'nothing', so emblematic in this play. The actor's

nakedness enacts the lines uttered by the Fool in Act 1: 'thou art an 0 without a figure: I am better than thou art now; I am fool thou art nothing' (1, iv, 211ff). And it is this non-figure of 0 that we see enacted on the stage. In a sense, this contemporary performance still remains faithful to Shakespeare's poetry, brining to the stage a version of the actor's phenomenal/semiotic body that would have been inconceivable even blasphemous for the Elizabethan audience. It also addresses the Elizabethan concept of the double body of the King, interestingly echoing the double body of the actor. To see a King naked or in rags – as is also the case with Xerxes at the end of Aeshylus' *The Persians*- is to witness the total and absolute destruction of state power. In the words of Pavis, this moment communicates to the audience a sense of both 'living elsewhere and in an eternal present'; an awareness of the languages of staging helps the performer to create this double movement. In turn this unique moment of presence has now become part of the reception history of *King Lear*; the 2007 production also has a naked Ian McKellen as Lear.

Another instance of an incongruous relationship between the performers phenomenal and semiotic body is cross-gender casting. This, of course, will always refer to the Elizabethan convention of boys playing women, but crucially as contemporary scholars claim was the case with this historical convention itself, it serves as a vehicle to examine, portray and sometimes critically analyse gender relations, the position of women and the absence of actresses. In the last ten years we have had Adrian Lester as Rosalind, Mark Rylance as Cleopatra, Vanessa Redgrave as Prospero and Kathryn Hunter as Lear. Casting a female performer as Lear may initially appear at odds for a play so concerned with Kingship, fatherhood and masculinity. On the other hand, the particular gendered perspective that the female performer brings also helps highlight and scrutinize what has been read as a complex and somewhat difficult position that the feminine occupies in this play. The incongruity between the actor's female body and that of the role functions as a *gestus* (as Brecht coins the term) that nods to the absent mother in this play and to the absent Queen in the historical context of the original performance.

All these casting and staging decisions are not solely the domain of the actor but derive from a creative encounter between actor and director. Although we tend to take the figure of the director for granted today (mainly due to his/her prominence in film) and although there has always been a mediating figure between play-text and stage throughout theatre history, it is within Modernism, as an aesthetic, socio-

political movement, that this role is clearly defined, acquires independent artistic status and bears almost sole responsibility for the creation of a performance.

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The main staging relationship that is scrutinised, problematised and becomes the subject of many essays and manifestos of theatrical modernism and the historical avant-garde is that between the playwright and the in-between, mediating figure that was soon to be termed: director. The battle was one of authorship, not of the play-text, for that incontestably belonged to the playwright, but of the performance. In 1911 Edward Gordon Craig - the son of Ellen Terry, the famous Victorian actress and the acting pupil of Henry Irving, the equally famous actor-manager of the Lyceum theatre in London – published his manifesto-style book, *On the Art of the Theatre*, heralding a new concept of theatre, making a strong and impassioned claim for the total independence of performance. In it he wrote:

> … the Art of the Theatre is neither acting nor the play, it is not scene nor dance, but it consists of all the elements of which these things are composed: action, which is the very spirit if acting; words, which are the body of the play; line and colour, which are the very heart of the scene; rhythm, which is the very essence of dance.[4]

And this 'new' art demands a new 'artist of the theatre', to use Craig's phrase. This figure was the director who, 'when he will have mastered the uses of action, words, line, colour and rhythm, then … may become an artist'.[5] Out of this *agon* between the playwright and the director, performance itself emerges as an independent artistic activity, no longer compelled to remain 'faithful' in any way to the play-text or to its historical staging conventions.

Within all the experiments of theatrical modernism it is as if the whole notion of stage conventions is re-addressed and the job of the mediating figure, which may have been simply to stage a play-text, becomes the job of the director and is elevated into a creative activity in its own right. Much of this experiment is facilitated by new stage technologies of the period (the introduction of electricity, new concepts of scenic space etc.) and new methods of actor training. Many of the modernists we

study in English Literature, T. S. Eliot, W. B. Yeats, Auden and Isherwood, D.H. Lawrence, Joseph Conrad all wrote plays, but significantly most also wrote essays about the relationships between plays and performance. In a sense they wrote their plays not only as playwrights but also, *as if* they were directors. They were concerned both with 'the poetry in the theatre' and 'the poetry of the theatre', to borrow Cocteau's phrase.[6]

Samuel Beckett, who in many ways continues the experiments in poetic drama and the stage, can also be said to merge the roles of playwright and director as all his plays come with detailed staging directions. These, however, are not interpretive, they don't serve to explain the roles or the play, but enact these roles. *Endgame* (1957) opens establishing the only *mise en scéne* of the play with Clov drawing the curtains on two windows (the sea window and the earth window), uncovering two dustbins (containing the 'accursed progenitors', Nagg and Nell) and then uttering the first lines, 'Finished, it's finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished'. He is the 'carer' of Hamm seated, blind covered in a blanket – a figure that could itself be seen as a reading of *Lear* after the apocalypse. Although the first productions (directed by Roger Blin in Paris and George Divine at the Royal Court, 1957) were unsuccessful, the play has come to occupy a privileged position in the history of twentieth century theatre, both as a completed performance piece (for the relationships it establishes between playwright, director and actor) and for the nightmarish, post-apocalyptic world it evokes. This image of the Beckettian stage has almost invariably been interpreted as resulting from the devastation and horror of the post WWII period.

Throughout his life, however, Beckett had always objected to literal and interpretive visualisations and stagings of his plays, when they diverge from his own directions. 'Anybody who cares for the work couldn't fail to be disgusted by it' was the phrase he insisted be added to the programme notes of JoAnne Akalaitis' production (with the American Repertory Theatre) of *Endgame* in 1984 set in a New York subway tunnel after a nuclear war. It is as if the most experimental playwright/philosopher of the twentieth century was denying the director his/her creative autonomy, an autonomy fought for and mostly achieved throughout the first decades of the same century. For in order for plays to survive they have to be performed, sometimes successfully, sometimes not. The concept of performance also should allow for the concept of failure. At the same, Beckett himself was inconsistent in his attitudes towards directors. Alan Schneider, the director he met in 1950s Paris

and who is known for faithfully 'serving' him throughout his life, had almost total freedom to do what he wished with his plays. For what mattered for Beckett was that Schneider (born in 1917 during the October Revolution, the son of Russian Jews, whose aunt died in Auschwitz) shared the same sensibility towards the horrors of his age. Beckett was equally generous towards many actors and directors he worked with and he himself would change the play-texts numerous times during the rehearsal process. As many contemporary scholars claim, the works of Beckett will survive through to the twenty first century, not necessarily through meticulous reconstruction, but through creative re-imaginings that will be always be contingent upon the historical contexts of their audiences, whether this is intentional or not.

On the one hand the so-called 'emancipation' of performance from the literary text, heralded by modernism and the avant-garde, allows for the total freedom of the performance event. On the other, this event always takes place within a historical context and always relies on audience reception. The success or failure of a performance might be measured not to the degree it remains faithful to a play-text (which is some postmodern performances is discarded altogether), but possibly to the degree it re-imagines that text within its contemporary historical context, providing through an embodied, live experience insight and pleasure for its audience. The study of play-texts as dynamic performance events, informed by their history of production and reception may offer us a similar experience of insight and pleasure.

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[1] Christie Carson, www.British Library/Treasures in Full/Shakespeare in Quarto. Also see Christie Carson and Jackie Bratton, eds., *The Cambridge King Lear*, *CD-ROM Text and Performance Archive* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
[2] See Christie Carson and Farah Karim-Cooper, eds., *Shakespeare's Globe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008)
[3] Patrice Pavis, *Dictionnaire de Théâtre* (Paris: Messidor, 1987), trans., Christine Shantz, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 301.
[4] Edward Gordon Craig, *On the Art of the Theatre* (London: Heinemann, 1911), 138.
[5] Ibid., 148.
[6] Jean Cocteau, 'Preface' (1922) to *The Wedding on the Eiffel Tower* (1921), trans. Michael Benedikt, in *Modern French Plays: An Anthology from Jarry to Ionesco* (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), 96-7.